

## Chapter 6:



# Writing Wrongs: Editing, Spelling, and Punctuation

As a writer, I hate to be wrong. I want my editor to read my chapters once and say, “Marvelous. This is perfect, Aimee.” (For the record, she never once said that after reading my writing for the first time.) Students are the same way. They want their writing to be marvelous and perfect the first time—the afraid-to-be-wrong syndrome rears its ugly head.

To make matters worse, teachers from all grade levels—even through high school—do not really talk much about the difference between editing and revision. So, many of my students see revision as changing spelling, punctuation, or capital letters.

While teaching at a writing institute this past summer, I had an interesting conversation with my teacher group. I had a mix of twenty-two teachers who taught grades four through twelve. These teachers were sharp—one of the better groups I have ever worked with.

I asked the teachers to work in groups to make two lists: One list for the things they want students to revise in their writing and the other list for things to do while editing. We came back together after ten minutes or so; our lists looked something like this:

### **Revision**

Vary sentences  
Wording  
Add details

### **Editing**

Check capitalization  
Check ending punctuation and proper uses of commas  
Check spelling  
Subject-verb agreement  
Paragraph structure  
Make sure verb tense is the same throughout the piece  
Edit passive voice  
Complete sentences—avoid run-on sentences and fragments



The editing list went on and on. As teachers, we sometimes are vague on exactly what we want kids to do when they revise. But we know exactly what we want from editing, as the lists show.

I began questioning this group of teachers. “What do you mean by ‘vary sentences?’” I began.

“Don’t start each sentence the same way,” someone responded.

“I want students to vary the length of their sentences,” another teacher added.

“Okay, this can mean two different things—or even more. I know I don’t want my students to have the simple sentence structure throughout their whole piece,” I replied. So as a group we started unpacking the revision list. We asked ourselves what we meant by each of these things we listed. We found there were a lot of expectations and not a lot of direct teaching.

One high school teacher said, “Our group realized two things. If we have been this vague in our teaching, no wonder students are editing instead of revising. And if we put the emphasis on editing, why would kids revise when they’ll only have to edit yet again? So we decided we should spend more time on revision, and a lot of the editing will take care of itself as they reread and rewrite.”

I love that comment and savor it. Our group nodded in agreement, realizing the truth in this conclusion. This is why the previous chapters are filled with lessons on revision, and why there are fewer lessons on editing in this chapter. As students take care in revising their writing, they also hone their editing skills.

## Structural Lessons

In fourth grade, I teach paragraph structure. Most of my students have a sense of what a paragraph is—that it should have three to five sentences, blah, blah, blah. However, most students do not write naturally in paragraphs. Actually they write in what I lovingly call a “Bert Story” format. Remember Bert from Sesame Street, with the uni-brow across his forehead? My students’ writing looks like Bert’s eyebrow—one long paragraph, a uni-paragraph. Two- and three-page stories, but just one long paragraph.



Although there are the makings of several different paragraphs within their work, kids really struggle with knowing when to start a new paragraph. Somehow, telling them to start a new paragraph whenever they have a new topic confuses them. It's the old afraid-to-be-wrong syndrome.

The technique that I teach for this is not brain surgery. It's not even creative, but it does the trick. First, we have a mini-lesson reviewing what constitutes a paragraph and the "rules" for paragraphing (Figure 6–1).

### Figure 6–1 Rules of Thumb for Paragraphing

1. In general, paragraphs are three to five sentences. Published writing often has more or less to a paragraph, but we're just learning to write, so stick with three to five sentences.
2. There are three basic parts to a paragraph. In general, you need all three. They are the topic sentence, detail sentences, and ending sentence.
3. Always, always, always *indent* the first sentence of a paragraph. An "indent" is about the length of the tip of your thumb to the first knuckle.

This review takes little time. My students tend to "know" paragraphs, they just don't know how to write them. Students keep notes in their notebooks toward the back. We may even paste in a couple of sample paragraphs that I have written or have copied from a book. Here is an example:



*Children would eat better if they had healthier food choices at school. Students should have a fruit and a vegetable choice every day. Instead of cookies, the cafeteria should offer low-fat crackers. Also, a salad or other vegetarian dish should be offered as a daily choice. I think schools should ban junk food and offer healthier choices for lunch.*

Students then work with partners to prove this really is a paragraph. Basically, they check the work I give them to make sure there is one topic sentence, some supporting details, and a concluding sentence. Students use a green pencil to underline the topic sentence, a yellow pencil to underline the detail sentences, and a red pencil to underline the ending sentence (Figure 6–2).



## Figure 6-2 Editing Strategy: Understanding Paragraph Structure

**How:** On a piece of chart paper, review the “Rules of Thumb” for paragraphs by listing and discussing each part. (See Figure 6-1.) Then, review or introduce the three parts of a paragraph: topic sentence, detail sentences, and ending sentence. Students should write this in the back of their notebooks. You could give them a copy of it already typed up; however, children pay more attention to things they need to write.

Next, give each student a copy of a paragraph that you have written or have copied from a text. Students glue this into their writer’s notebooks. With a green pencil, students underline the topic sentence. With a yellow pencil, students underline the detail sentences. With a red pencil, students underline the ending sentence.

**Why?** This strategy helps them remember the three parts of the paragraph. Often students know in their heads what the parts of a paragraph are, but they cannot identify them in context. This gives them practice with a correctly written paragraph.

**Extension:** Have students write their own paragraphs in their notebooks on any topic. Then they can switch notebooks with a partner and try color-coding the paragraph.

This sounds very structured but is new for many of my students. Children find comfort in structure when they’re uncomfortable. So this is where we start. This all takes place in the notebook. Then I tell the kids to look at their drafts from writing workshop, and if they notice they need to make some paragraphs, they should do so (Figure 6-3).

## Figure 6-3 Guidelines for Paragraph Edit

1. Topic Sentence (Editing code: Green for start)

The topic sentence is your hook, it should have a bit of attitude in it. There is only one topic sentence per paragraph. For example, “My guinea pig is the best pet in the world.”

2. Detail Sentences (Editing code: Yellow—slowing down to give information)

The detail sentences are your “proof” that your topic sentence is true. You are giving reasons to support your topic sentence. For example: “My guinea pig likes to cuddle. He likes to play with me. He even eats out of my hand.”

3. Ending Sentence (Editing code: Red)

The ending sentence is your wrap-up. It ends the topic of the paragraph and may lead the reader to the next paragraph. For example: “I love my guinea pig.”

Many students will need more help than this. I don’t want the lesson to take a whole writer’s workshop from their writing, so I work in bits and pieces. I think of these as a series of mini-lessons.

The second lesson about revising paragraphs helps lead the students to further revision. I start by asking for a student volunteer to put a paragraph from his or her writing on chart paper. As a class, we then underline any topic sentences



in green. We underline detail sentences in yellow and any concluding sentences in red. I say “any” because sometimes we don’t find one of these three kinds of sentences and sometimes we find more than just one topic or concluding sentence.

We then refer to our notes on paragraphs. In general, a paragraph should have one topic sentence. Check the chart paper—does this paragraph have one topic sentence? If not, how do we fix it? Does this paragraph have three or four detail sentences that relate to the topic sentence? If not, how do we fix it? We eventually fix the paragraph together. I then ask the students to try this out in their notebooks with a paragraph from their own writing.

It is amazing what the students discover. I love listening to their conversations. “Oh my gosh, I have no details anywhere—just topic sentences and conclusions.” Or “I don’t have one concluding sentence in my whole story. No wonder I can’t get to an ending!”

Nicole found she had few details in her story. Once she tried this strategy in her notebook, she was able to recognize what she needed and where. (For the sake of this black-and-white book, the color code was changed to different kinds of lines: Dotted line for topic sentence, single underline for detail sentences, and double underline for concluding sentence.) Here is her sample from her notebook:

### **First paragraph:**

My cousins are very weird. When they come over to my house, they laugh until they are sick. But, when I go to their house, they don’t make a peep.

Nicole decided she didn’t have enough detail sentences. Instead of my telling her to add more details to her story, Nicole knew she needed to add details to support her topic sentence, “My cousins are very weird.”

### **Revised paragraph:**

My cousins are very weird. When they come over to my house, they laugh until they are sick. They make funny noises while watching movies. My cousins even run in the house. But, when I go to their house, they don’t make a peep.



## Figure 6–4 Editing Strategy: Color-Coding Paragraphs

**How:** Students will use their current drafts of writing to revise paragraphs. First, they must determine if the paragraphs they have are correctly structured. Often students will have one long paragraph that needs to be broken into several small ones.

As students read through their drafts, they will underline any topic sentences in green. All detail sentences will be underlined in yellow (or black if using yellow legal pads), and ending sentences will be underlined in red.

After color-coding the paragraphs, students will have a visual representation of what they need to do. Do they have too many topic sentences without details? Did they forget wrap-up sentences? Students then go to revise paragraphs based on what they need.

**Why?** Oftentimes children don't know how to make their pieces longer or where to add details. This strategy helps kids see their paragraphs in parts. If there are not enough yellow lines between green and red ones, then that is where the writer needs to add details. This provides a road map for students to add to their writing.

**Caution:** When students don't understand what to do or are trying to do this without really doing it, they'll underline sentences without reading them. So, a child might underline the first sentence green, the next three yellow, and the fourth one red without thinking about how those sentences act within a paragraph. Then the student will repeat the pattern. If you see perfect paragraphing colors in a draft the first time, you might want to check to see if the child was simply creating the pattern. If so, the child did not understand what to do, doesn't understand paragraphs, or didn't want to do it. Whatever the case may be, teacher intervention is needed.

Students use this strategy on their drafts (Figure 6–4). What do they learn? They learn *where* to put more details. They learn *how* to separate and organize their ideas. They learn *when* it's okay to have paragraphs that are shorter or longer than the general three-to-five sentence rule.

Having the paragraph notes in their notebooks allows students to use this strategy again and again.

## Playing with Grammar, Spelling, and Mechanics

Notebooks are useful for supporting editing, or “correcting” parts of writing, in many ways. During this phase, students are correcting grammar, usage, mechanics, and spelling. (My school system reduced this to the acronym GUMS.) Teaching grammar and spelling is an important part of teaching writing. I find it is more effective to teach this during a time when most of my students are editing.



The key to teaching quality editing is to take it one skill at a time. This is difficult to do, because there are so many mistakes that we see at first. However, kids can't master more than one thing at a time and truly remember it weeks, days, or even hours later. If they can, they should be encouraged to become editors.

For example, in fourth grade I expect my students to begin each sentence with a capital letter and end it with some form of punctuation. So I don't spend a lot of time on that. My students do struggle, however, with identifying and using passive voice. So I spend time on identifying passive verbs and replacing them with active ones.

Gathering the class together, I start a conversation by referring to work we have already done. "Boys and girls, remember our work with *John Henry*?" They nod and say, yes. "I want you to turn to our work in your notebooks that we did with this text. I'll give you a moment to find it."

Students soon flip to the right page and are skimming over their notes.

"What did we notice about the kinds of words Lester used to create images in the readers' minds?" I ask.

Hands go up, and Michael answers, "active verbs."

"Right. We noticed that Lester used verbs that showed action and created images, like *pulverized*." I continue, "There are some verbs, though, that don't show action."

"How can that be?" Colleen asks, "I thought all verbs were action words."

"Verbs definitely drive the sentence, but can you show me how to *do* the verb *is*?" I ask.

Students look around at each other with a look that says, what in the world is she talking about? I begin to list some verbs on the board that lead to passive voice in writing. (We'll look at our grammar book in the next mini-lesson.) I list *is*, *are*, and *was*. Three overused forms of the verb *to be* in my students' writing.

"These are verbs." I say.

"Really?" asks Matthew. "I didn't know that."

"Yes, they are verbs. We use them a lot. The problem is we use them so much, we forget to use more active verbs."

"And then our writing doesn't have images, right?" interrupted Matthew.

"Sometimes, yes." I say. "Today, I want you to choose a notebook entry you have already written. Circle the words *is*, *are*, and *was*. Then try to rewrite the entry using more active verbs." And off they go to work (Figure 6–5).



**Figure 6-5** Editing Strategy: Identifying Passive Voice

**How:** Students are working in the back of the notebook, where they keep their grammar and editing notes. As I begin the lesson, I may refer to the *John Henry* example we used earlier when reading like writers. In that example we noticed the author used verbs to create images more than he used adjectives. I may even review the list we created to show them the kinds of verbs the author used: *pulverized, shook, draped, and glimmered*. These are action verbs. You can do these things—they create images of activity in your mind.

Then either take out the grammar book and turn to the linking verbs and forms of *to be*, or begin listing some of them on the board: *is, were, was, will, would, should, are*, etc. Ask the students if these words create images in their minds. Can you actively do them? Show me *is*. You can't. These verbs create a passive voice. Have students make a list of these in their notebooks with a heading: Try NOT to Use These.

**Why?** Writers create images in readers' minds. They do so with strong verbs and specific nouns. The verb drives the sentence, so it can be the most important word in a sentence. Students should be aware of the weaker verbs—passive verbs—that don't add to their writing. Passive voice may not be avoided altogether, but it can be decreased significantly with some attention.

**Extension:** Give students a paragraph using passive voice to glue into their notebooks. Working with a partner, students circle the weak verbs and replace them with active verbs. Finally, have students focus in their writing on using active voice.

The most glaring errors, however, are spelling errors. Sometimes misspelled words are hard to find, and, if you think one is misspelled, well, then you have to correct it. That's even more work. And quite frankly, writers are tired by this point; they want it done and over with already. For these reasons, among others, I make sure to share several strategies for finding misspelled words with my students. They can choose one that works for them.

A series of editing mini-lessons about finding misspelled words may begin something like this. Keep in mind that I start a lesson, kids take notes in their notebooks, try it out on a sample I give them or on an entry in their notebooks, and finally go to their drafts.

I start with a question: How do you know when a word is misspelled in your writing? The answers come back at me: "They don't look right." "I circle words I use that I know I don't know how to spell." "I just read through my story and look for words that aren't right."

Kids are writing this question and their answers in their notebooks while I write them on the chart paper. I then hand them a paragraph to glue into their notebooks and direct them to try using these strategies to find the misspelled words in the passage. I'll have this same passage on an overhead transparency so we






can look at it together. As we go through the passage to share the “answers,” a few students may get all of the misspelled words; however, many will miss words they should have known were misspelled.

This is not uncommon. The more proficient we become at reading the more we focus on comprehension rather than spelling. It’s only when a misspelled word interrupts comprehension that many of us will even notice it. This doesn’t excuse misspelled words in published pieces, but it does help explain why it’s difficult for students to find all of the mistakes.

I then ask the students to read the passage backward, isolating each word from the context of the story. So we start at the end of the sample, with the last word, and read from right to left. This forces kids to look at each word by itself. “Do you notice possible misspellings? If so, circle them. Then go back and read through the piece from the beginning. Circle any more words you think are incorrect. Then go back and correct the spellings.” The following sample is written the way we would read it backward. It won’t make sense, but you’ll see all of the misspellings.

 .bed in up woke I Then .home get to how know didnt I becus  
 ,cryed and cryed I .lost got and woods the through walkd I  
 .dreem bad a had I nite Last

### Figure 6–6 Editing Strategy: Reading Backwards

#### *Reading Backwards (to find misspelled words)*

**How:** Give students a passage of text to glue into their notebooks. There should be several misspelled words in the text.

Show students how to read the paragraph backward in order to isolate each word. Tell them to start at the end, and read right to left. Looking at each word, they should determine if it is spelled correctly. If they’re not sure or know it’s wrong, they should circle it.

After students have had a chance to complete the exercise, go over the words they should have caught. Using this strategy in their own writing will help them find misspelled words.

**Why?** As students become more fluent readers, they begin to read for meaning instead of pronouncing each individual word. This is good for reading, but it can cause the reader not to pay as close attention to each word. So, when students go to edit their work or work of others, they use what they know about reading and often miss words spelled incorrectly. By reading the text backward, it won’t make sense, students will go more slowly, and they’ll focus on each word in an isolated way.

**Extension:** Read text backward to find homophones (words that sound alike but are spelled differently). Circle the homophones. Then go back and read the text for meaning. Is the circled word the correct homophone for the sentence? If it is...great. If not, fix it.



After students try this in their notebooks, I hear a lot of “OHHH! Now I get it.” Students then go to their drafts to find those misspellings using this strategy (Figure 6–6).

## Ending Punctuation Review

After I read the poem “Call the Periods, Call the Commas” in one breath, someone usually says, “That’s a hard poem to read.” It is a hard poem to read aloud. There are no line breaks, white space, or punctuation to guide or give the reader pause. This is not unlike some of my students’ work, especially in the beginning of the year.



### Call the Periods

#### Call the Commas

*Call the doctors Call the nurses Give me a breath of  
air I've been reading all your stories but the periods  
aren't there Call the policemen Call the traffic guards  
Give me a STOP sign quick Your sentences are running  
When they need a walking stick Call the commas Call  
the question marks Give me a single clue Tell me  
where to breathe with a punctuation mark or two*

(Dakas 1990, p. 49)

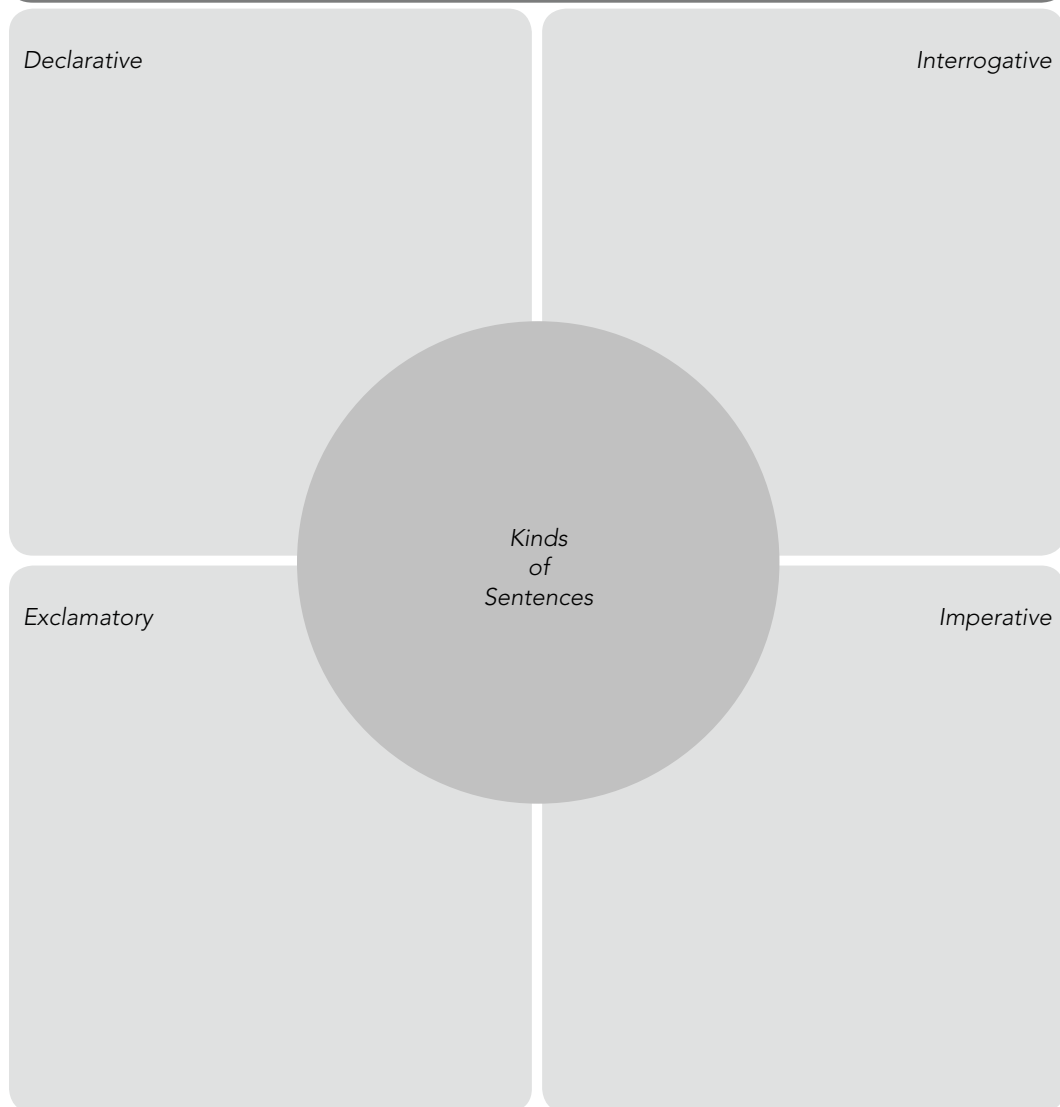
“It is a difficult poem. Kalli Dakos used to be a teacher. Why do you think she wrote this?”

Hands go up everywhere. “It’s pretty obvious,” says Shannon, “she wanted her students to use punctuation.”

“Right, and why do you suppose I gave this to all of you today?” I ask. Now kids are giggling guiltily as they realize what I’m going to tell them. I continue, “I know you know about ending punctuation and basic comma usage. I need you to practice what you know in all of your writing—no matter where it is—in your notebook, in social studies, on science labs . . . everywhere.”

Students seem resigned to the mini-lecture, but I’m not through yet. The next day, I continue the review with a chart drawn on paper (see Figure 6–7):

Figure 6–7 Frayer Model

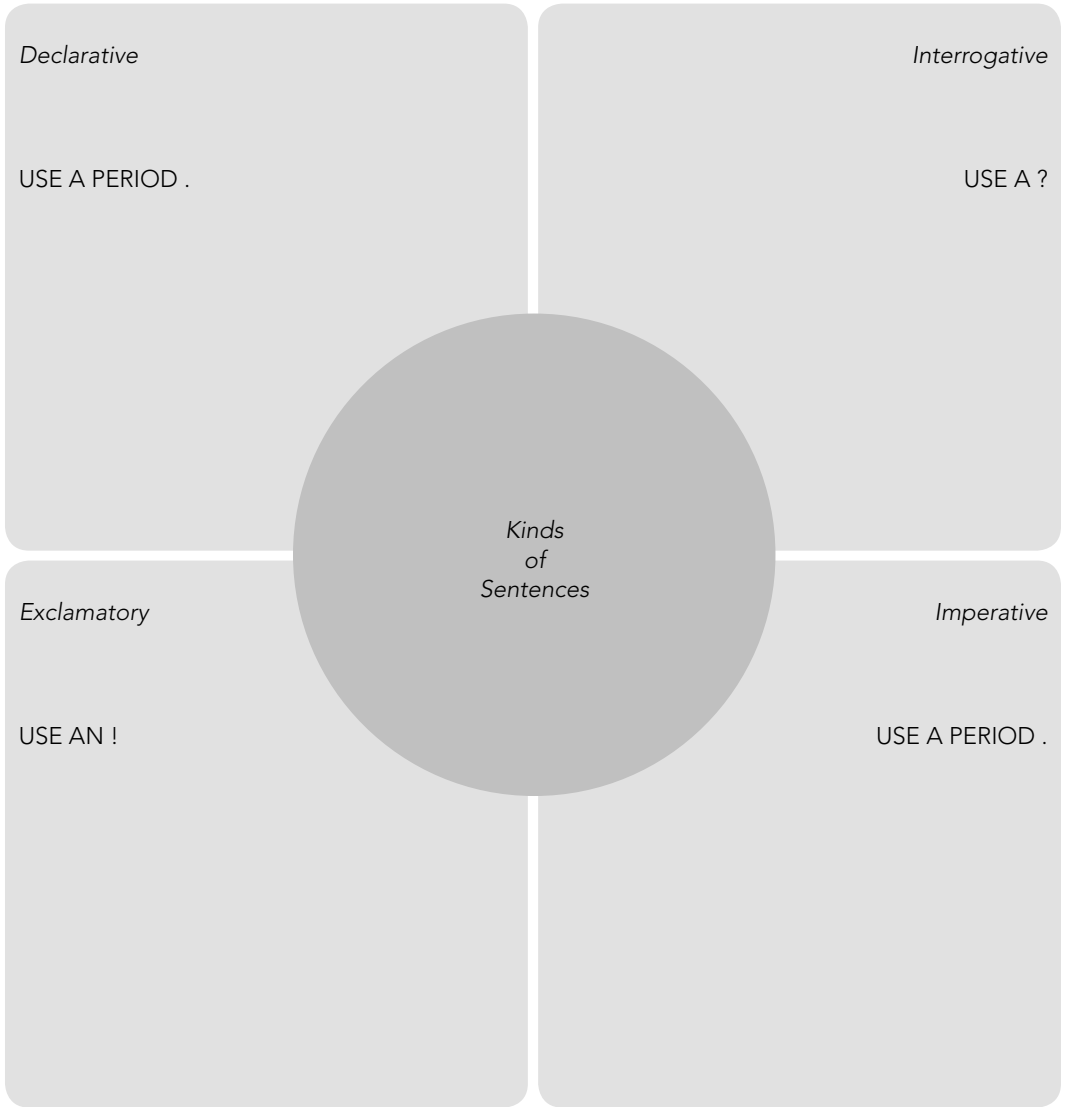


This is known as a Frayer Model. “Boys and girls, I want to make sure we’re all on the same page concerning end punctuation.”

I review the four kinds of sentences: declarative (a simple statement), interrogative (a question), exclamatory (an exclamation), and imperative (a command). I then ask, “What kind of punctuation do you use to end each of



**Figure 6–8** *Punctuation Chart*



these kinds of sentences?” We fill in our chart together (Figure 6–8). We finish the review by hanging the chart in the classroom as a reference. This is the extent of my whole-class review on ending punctuation in fourth grade. If smaller groups of students need more instruction, I usually use conferences to help them individually (Figure 6–9).



### Figure 6–9 Editing Strategy: Ending Punctuation Review

**How:** By third grade, students have been taught, reminded, and told to use capital letters at the beginning of sentences and ending punctuation at the end of sentences. But they don't always use that punctuation, do they? As a review, I give each child a copy of the poem "Call the Periods, Call the Commas," by Kalli Dakos. They glue it in their notebooks as I read it aloud. (This poem takes practice because it looks like a paragraph and there is NO ending punctuation anywhere.) As kids are giggling at my face turning blue, they get the point. I'll ask, "What does this poem tell us?" And clearly, students know it's a reminder to use ending punctuation: periods, question marks, and exclamation points. This can also lead into a series of lessons about comma usage.

**Why?** Kids still don't use ending punctuation like they should, and it's a funny way to get a serious point across.

**Extensions:** This lesson can open a series of lessons about commas. Or it can start a series of lessons about types of sentences and correct ending punctuation: declarative sentences get periods, interrogative sentences get question marks, exclamatory sentences get exclamation points, and compound sentences get commas and periods.

### *Punctuating Compound Sentences*

My students are seated at their desks where they can see the overhead. Notebooks are opened to the back because we will begin discussing how to punctuate compound sentences. Students generally take notes by writing in their notebooks while I write on the overhead.

"The past couple of days we have talked about ending punctuation," I begin. "Who can give us a quick summary as a review?"

"Ending punctuation comes at the end of a sentence, question, or exclamation. A period, question mark, or exclamation point are the only three ways to end a sentence," volunteers Courtney. From the way she regurgitates the information, I wonder if maybe I've harped on the point too much this week.

"Right. But, like any rule, there is an exception," I say.

"There is?!" blurts Nate. "I thought that was a done deal."

"Well, it's true that you must always have some sort of ending punctuation after a complete sentence, but it can sometimes be a comma instead of a period. Does anyone know when you would use a comma and not a period?"

"In a compound sentence?" answers Courtney, a bit unsure of herself.

"Yes, that's exactly it." I begin to write on the overhead as students write in their notebooks:



## Punctuation for Compound Sentences

*Rules:*

- ◆ A sentence must always have ending punctuation.
- ◆ A sentence may end with a comma within a compound sentence.
- ◆ A compound sentence must end with standard ending punctuation.

*Example:*

David runs very fast. David likes to paint.

David runs very fast, and David likes to paint.

I stop to talk with the students. “What is the difference between the two examples?”

Matthew is first to raise his hand. “You use the same sentences but you put a comma after *fast*, then the word *and*.”

“Good observation. When you write a compound sentence, you have two sentences. The first sentence can’t use a period so you need to use a comma. Notice the comma comes before the word *and*.” For some reason my students often want to put the comma after the word *and* or *but*. I have found that making this simple connection between the period and comma is very helpful in clearing up that misunderstanding (Figure 6–10).

### Figure 6–10 Editing Strategy: Punctuating Compound Sentences

**How:** Refer back to the poem, “Call the Periods, Call the Commas,” by Kalli Dakos. It’s important to have ending punctuation, but sometimes one sentence is so long it needs some rest stops.

In the back of the notebook, students copy the sentences I have written on the board: “Ms. Buckner likes to read. Ms. Buckner thinks reading is good for the soul.” Two separate sentences can be joined into one sentence by using a connecting word: *and*, *but*, *because*, *so*, *or*. When you join two sentences to make a compound sentence, you need to put a comma where the period would usually go. For example (students write this in their notebooks, too, making the comma bold): “Ms. Buckner likes to read, because she thinks it is good for the soul.”

Notice, where the period used to be after “Ms. Buckner likes to read,” there is now a comma. That allows the reader to take a breath and signals there is more to come. In a compound sentence, you may have only one comma for separating sentences. If you have more than one, you may have a run-on sentence.

Have students try this with a partner by writing three compound sentences of their own (in their notebooks) and punctuating them correctly.



**Figure 6–10** *Editing Strategy: Punctuating Compound Sentences* (continued)

**Why?** Students often want to put the comma in a compound sentence after the connecting word. By demonstrating that it goes where the period should have gone, this lesson helps kids remember to put the comma before the connecting word. For those who aren't using commas at all, it's a good way to introduce the skill.

**Extensions:** Students can edit an entry in their notebooks for commas in compound sentences. Have students rewrite an entry from their notebooks and combine several pairs of sentences into compound sentences. Use the commas correctly. This lesson can also lead to a series about varying sentence length in a piece.

The question comes to mind, Do we ever *really* become independent writers? I am beginning to think—not if we're lucky. Although I want my students to have the ability to write independently, without me telling them what and when to write, I also want them to understand that writers evolve, as we all do. They need to be open to the opportunities that will improve their writing. Some of these may come from being in a community of writers, like in our classrooms. Some may come from working with partners and learning how to talk about writing. Some may come from using resources to inform themselves of the correctness or structure of their writing.

Editing is a lot of work. It can make a mess of a draft—to the point where writers can no longer read it. Using the writer's notebook to support this work gives students a place to try their revisions and hone their editing skills before making changes to their drafts. It's not that the draft doesn't ever get messy, but it's now a more productive mess.



